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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the development of a theory surrounding the use of coping strategies in students with different approaches to study. It represents the development of an earlier study in which 20 interviews were conducted of women distance learners who had previously responded to a survey concerning their experiences of distance learning. The subsequent interviews were analyzed using grounded theory coding techniques, from which three approaches to study were identified. Tentative links were then made between approaches to study, need for support and guidance, and engagement with materials. It became evident that students develop coping strategies depending on the approach to study they adopt and access to support and guidance as they progress around a coping cycle. (Contains 5 tables and 17 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Approaches to Study: their impact on coping strategies in women distance learners.

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Abstract

This paper reports the development of a theory around the use of coping strategies in students with different approaches to study. It represents the development of an earlier study in which 20 interviews were conducted of women distance learners who had previously responded to a survey concerning their experiences of distance learning. The subsequent interviews were analysed using grounded theory coding techniques, from which three approaches to study were identified. Tentative links were then made between approaches to study, need for support and guidance and engagement with materials. It became evident students develop coping strategies depending on the approach to study they adopt and access support and guidance as they progress around a coping cycle.

Introduction

This paper is based on the findings of a two-phase study of women distance learners, all of whom were registered nurses (Carnwell, 1998). The first phase of the study involved a questionnaire survey (n=98), which explored student experiences of study. In phase two ethnographic interviews were conducted of 20 students from the original sample. Data were analysed using grounded theory techniques of open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

The data revealed three approaches to study – systematic wader, speedy-focuser and global dipper. Each of these approaches was associated with different needs for support and guidance. These tentative associations were validated by assigning numerical codes to the categories and conducting a logistic regression analysis (Carnwell, 2000a). From

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this analysis it became evident that students' need for support and guidance is as important as the approaches to study they adopt. Moreover, it appeared that students adopted approaches to study and accessed support and guidance as a coping strategy in order to progress through their studies. For some, coping strategies were a positive experience, resulting in an enjoyable learning experience. For others, their use of coping strategies reflected a need to adapt their approach to study and to access support mechanisms to compensate for situational or personal factors that would otherwise hamper their progress. This paper reports on the development of the theory of coping strategies and their relationship to approaches to study in women distance learners.

Approaches to Study in Distance Learning

The three approaches to study identified from the interviews were labelled as systematic wader, speedy-focuser and global dipper. The attributes of these approaches to study bear similarity to literature on learning styles, approaches to study and learning strategies. Systematic waders, for example, are serialist learners (Pask, 1976) who are analytic and well organised (Riding, 1991), whereas speedy-focusers and global dippers tend towards holist or flexible holist learning (Pask, 1976), ideas being seen all at once, rather than in sequence (Flannery, 1993).

What was interesting from this data was the relationship between the approaches to study and other characteristics of learning, such as the need for guidance and engagement with materials. Systematic waders, for example, prefer closed, structured materials so that they can work through them systematically and independently with minimal need for guidance from a tutor. This strategy enables them to engage actively with the materials (table 1). Speedy-focusers prefer open, unstructured materials so that they are not hampered by a tight structure. They might need some guidance from a tutor, but would not expect the tutor to be proactive in making contact. Their engagement with the materials is therefore spasmodic and often related to assignment tasks. The global dipper approach is characterised by a high need for guidance from both the materials and a tutor. These students engage passively with the materials and need guidance in deciding what is relevant to read (Carnwell, 2000b).

Table 1 Descriptions and attributes of the three approaches to study

Approach to study	**Description**	**Attributes relating to guidance and engagement with materials.**
Systematic wader	Reads systematically, taking few short cuts. 'Wades' through the materials and sometimes gets 'bogged down'. Is interested in content, enjoys learning and views knowledge as 'sought'.	Closed materials combined with passive tutor role and academic support provide sufficient guidance. Internal dialogue successful. Serialist learning. Read as instructed. Active engagement with materials fosters deep learning.
Speedy-focuser	Focuses quickly on key points relevant to the assignment. Is a very efficient and effective learner. Is instrumental in learning and views knowledge as 'given'.	Open materials and passive tutor role preferred. No dialogic preference. Flexible holist approach to learning. Selects reading according to its relevance to the essay. Only engages actively with certain parts of the materials, therefore engages in limited deep learning, as related to the essay.
Global dipper	Begins systematically, but resorts to dipping in and out of the materials in search of clues to answer the question. Seeks advice from others, finds the learning process difficult. Views knowledge as 'given'	Needs closed materials, both types of dialogue and an active tutor to provide necessary guidance. Adopts flexible serialist approach to a learning. Selects reading according to the essay, but has difficulty making the selection. Passively engages with the materials and anxiously seeks out a variety of external dialogue. Engages in surface learning.

The characteristics of the three approaches to study and their relationship to other variables suggest a need for students to adopt coping strategies in order to progress satisfactorily through the learning process. Theories of coping were therefore related to the three approaches to study (Carnwell, 2001).

Definitions and theories of coping

The concept of coping has been examined in psychological literature and many attempts have been made to measure the construct. Coping has been defined as 'efforts, both action-oriented and intra-psychic, to manage (that is, master, tolerate, reduce and minimise) environmental and internal demands, and conflicts among them, which tax or exceed a person's resources' (Cohen and Lazarus, 1979: 219). This definition can be applied to distance learning in that women distance learners attempt to minimise the demands placed up on them by the combination of study and family life. If successful this will enable them 'to avoid being harmed by life strains' (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978).

The notion of life strains, and people's attempts to deal with them, has resulted in the concept of coping being examined is both psychological and sociological literature. In psychological literature, the focus on coping theories and attempts to measure coping, has been related to stress and people's adaptation to stressful events (Holahan & Moos, 1987). In sociological literature, the focus has been on understanding the impact that society exerts on people (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978) and how coping behaviours are shared by people with similar social characteristics. Both of these approaches are relevant to women distance learners. That is, distance learning can represent a stressful life event for some women students, and this, combined with the additional societal expectations of women, is likely to result in the development of coping strategies that are shared by this social group.

Psychological literature is replete with scales to measure coping (Scheier and Carver, 1977; Abouserie, 1996; Carver et al., 1989; Adejumo & Brysiewicz, 1998). In fact Cohen (1987) reported no less that fourteen such instruments. Carver et al.'s (1989) theoretically based instrument (COPE) and its adaptation by Adejumo & Brysiewicz (1998) for the purpose of studying coping strategies of baccalaureate nursing students is of particular interest to this paper. They argue that understanding how students cope with stressful situations would enable educators to work with students to enable them to adapt their coping strategies as necessary. Following Carver et al. (1989), Adejumo & Brysiewicz argue that people cope better if they use familiar and comfortable strategies than if such

strategies are not available. Their adaptation of the COPE inventory (Carver et al., 1989) resulted in the development of items deemed to measure problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and dysfunctional (not-very-useful) coping strategies. Each of these three types of coping can be compared with those suggested by Holahan and Moos (1987). *Problem-focused* strategies, for example, are similar to Holahan and Moos's (1987) *active-behavioural strategies* (table 2). Both problem-focused and active-behavioural strategies are active in nature and rely on doing things, such as making contact with other people, or changing one's own activities.

Table 2 Items measuring problem-focused coping/active-behavioural strategies

(Adejumo, & Brysiewicz, 1998)	(Holahan & Moos, 1987)
Planning	Trying to find out more about the situation
Suppression of competing activities	Talking with someone about the problem
Restraint coping	Busying self with other things to take mind off the problem
Seeking of social support	Getting away from things for a while.

Items deemed to measure emotion-focused coping (Adejumo, & Brysiewicz's, 1998) can be compared to those measuring active-cognitive strategies (Holahan and Moos, 1987) (table 3). Both of these strategies rely on thinking about the problem in order to find a solution.

Table 3 Items measuring emotion-focused/active-cognitive coping

(Adejumo, & Brysiewicz, 1998)	(Holahan & Moos 1987)
Seeking emotional support	Praying for guidance
Positive re-interpretation	Preparing for the worst
Acceptance	Considering alternative ways of handling the problem
Denial	Drawing on past experience.

The third category, dysfunctional strategies (Adejumo, & Brysiewicz, 1998), bear similarity to Holahan and Moos's (1987) *avoidance strategies*. Again these categories are very similar, with a reliance on venting of emotions, disengagement and use of alcohol.

Table 4 Items measuring dysfunctional strategies

(Adejumo, & Brysiewicz, 1998)	(Holahan and Moos , 1987)
Focus on and venting of emotions	Taking it out on other people
Behavioural disengagement	Avoiding being with people
Mental disengagement	
Alcohol-drug disengagement	Drinking or eating more to reduce tension.

The top three strategies revealed by Adejumo and Brysiewicz's (1998) study were planning, turning to religion, and seeking social support, with students often combining problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies. Within the dysfunctional category, venting of emotions was most commonly used. By comparison, Holahan and Moos's (1987) study revealed that active coping strategies (both cognitive and behavioural) are associated with more personal and contextual resources (e.g. self-confidence and family support), whereas avoidance coping strategies are associated with fewer resources.

A common feature of these studies is the significance of social support as a coping mechanism – a factor that endorses the use of sociological studies into coping. One such study was conducted by Pearlin and Schooler (1978), who interviewed 2300 people in Chicago between ages 18-65 about how they cope with ordinary adverse social experiences. Pearlin and Schooler (1978:9) identified three major types of coping. The first type, responses that change the situation out of which strainful experience arises' were deemed to be most successful as they eliminate the source of stress. The second type, 'responses that control the meaning of the strainful experience after it occurs but before the emergence of stress', aim to control the meaning of the problem. This could include gaining solace from comparing self with others who feel the same way, which was often exhibited by global dippers in this study. The third category, responses that function more for the control of stress itself after it has emerged' help people to

accommodate to existing stress without being overwhelmed by it. An interesting finding in Pearlin and Schooler's (1978) study, is their distinction between the *psychological resources* people use and things they *do* to cope with stress, psychological resources being more important when dealing with things over which people have little control, such as job. By comparison, things people *do* are more important in situations where they have more control, such as close interpersonal relationships. 'This might be why women distance learners often find it easier to divert energy away from study (requiring psychological resources) and towards practical tasks within the home, which will ease stress within family life' (Carnwell, 2001:121). This factor also demonstrates the significance of the social context in which coping takes place.

The social context of coping

An alternative view of coping strategies, which takes account of social context, is that of Hargreaves' (1978:77) who argues that:

'The essence of a model organised around the concept of coping strategy is that all actors ... act meaningfully and creatively in response to their experienced world'.

Using this model of coping strategies, Carnwell (2001) argues that the challenge of distance learning creates 'problems' for women distance learners. In responding to these 'problems' they develop a range of tactics that will make life bearable during their learning experience. The three approaches to study identified during an earlier phase of this research, became an integral part of the coping strategies that women used during what Hargreaves (1978) describes as a 'coping cycle'.

Although Hargreaves' coping cycle was initially used to explain coping strategies used by teachers, it does have salience for distance learning (figure 1).

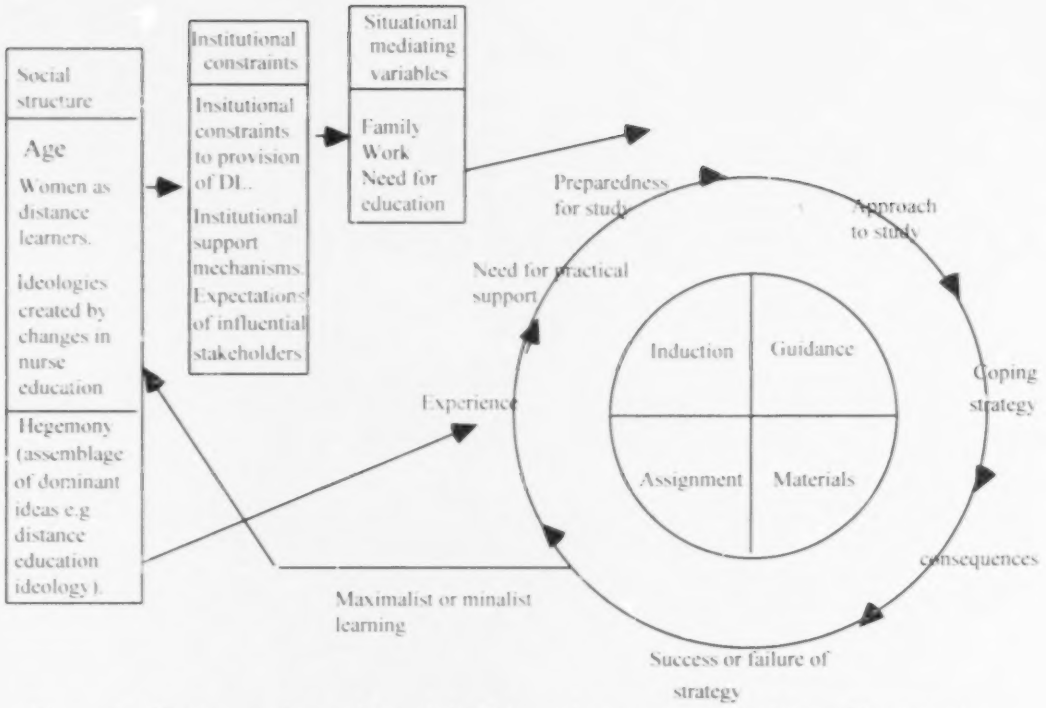

Figure 1 - Coping cycle used by adult distance learners - adapted from Hargreaves (1978).

Like the teachers in Hargreaves' (1978) example, adult distance learners have to cope with a variety of constraints, such as contradictory goals, material constraints, and a proliferation of educational ideologies. Contradictory goals emerge at an institutional level between the need to gain educational qualifications whilst working full-time. Women also face material constraints including lack of institutional resources (e.g. access to academic support) and personal resources (e.g. time and space to study in the home). Finally, the changing ideologies faced women distance learners in nursing has arisen from changes in nurse education with its emphasis on diploma and degree level education (Carnwell, 2001).

These constraints are institutionally mediated (Hargreaves, 1978), with women frequently diverting their attention away from their studies to attend to domestic or work commitments. As Hargreaves argues, coping mechanisms are also based on taken-for-granted assumptions about learning and are constructed within parameters that limit the

scope of creativity. Taken-for-granted assumptions for women include the perception that schooling and learning are predominantly for children – a perception that is reinforced by the home-based orientation of distance learning (Carnwell, 2001).

The coping cycle used for this study also includes an inner circle, which is divided into four quadrants reflecting the distance learning context: induction, guidance, materials-design and assignment preparation (Carnwell, 2001). 'Induction' is required to prepare students for study and this might include a discussion of approaches to study and associated coping strategies. 'Guidance' is then needed according to the students' needs and this, too, is likely to be mediated by students' approaches to study and coping strategies. 'Materials-design' can either help or hinder students, depending on their approach to study and therefore part of the induction and guidance phases should include a discussion of how the materials can be used by students with different approaches to study. Social and institutional constraints should also be taken into account when guiding students in their use of materials. It can be counter-productive, for example, to advise a global dipper, who works full-time and has a family, to work systematically through the materials. The final, inner quadrant, assignment preparation, relies heavily on the outcome of the previous quadrants and is likely to result in either a favourable or unfavourable learning experience. 'Coping strategies might include an assignment focus in the reading of materials; a tendency to read as instructed; a deep or surface approach to understanding; a maximalist or minimalist approach to reading; and an organised or disorganised approach to assignment completion' (Carnwell, 2001:127).

According to Hargreaves (1978), change will occur if coping strategies prove inefficient, in which case new ones will be devised. This principle of adaptation therefore moves coping strategies beyond psychological measurement towards the interaction between the individual and the learning context.

Demonstrating coping strategies using case studies

Three case studies, reflecting the three approaches to study, were used for a selective coding process (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to validate the emerging theory that students with different approaches to study use different coping strategies (Carnwell, 1998; 2001). The case studies draw on Hargreaves' (1978) coping cycle, approaches to study and associated need for guidance, and theories of coping strategies (table 5).

Table 5 – Three case studies demonstrating the coping cycle, approaches to study and coping strategies

	Anna	*Bev*	*Kay*
Social structure	Pressure from change in nurse education.	Needed credits to access degree.	Pressure from change in nurse education.
Institutional constraints	Stakeholder gave opportunity.	Stakeholder sponsored degree.	Local policy requirement diploma status.
Situational mediating variables	Family, worked full-time. Needed practical support.	Worked full-time throughout. No family. No need for practical support. Well organised.	Worked full-time. Needed practical support.
Preparation for study	Yes, needed minimal guidance, and open materials.	Prepared for study.	Not adequately prepared for study. Needed guidance and closed materials.
Approach to study	Systematic wader, serialist learning, maximalist commitment.	Speedy-focuser. Efficient transition through coping cycle.	Global dipper. Flexible serialist approach unsuccessful so changed to holist learning, then to searching for clues.
Coping strategy	Successful, problem-focused by increasing efforts to achieve goal (Adejumo & Brysiewicz, 1998).	Successful, but much learning at a surface level. Did not enjoy learning.	Unsuccessful. Progressed around coping cycle several times and did not enjoy learning.

Of the three case studies, Anna, a systematic wader, appears to have been most successful in adopting a successful approach to study and coping strategy. Anna also illustrates the success of problem-focused coping (Adejumo & Brysiewicz, 1998). By comparison, Bev's coping strategy bears some resemblance to Pearlin and Schooler's (1978:9) three types of coping (Carnwell, 2001). Bev used the speedy-focused approach to 'change the situation out of which strainful experience arises' i.e., by adapting the nature of the learning package to meet her needs to work quickly, she prevented the strain of study becoming uncomfortable and therefore eliminated the source of stress. As Carnwell (2001) points out, the fact that she did not enjoy the learning experience indicates that she did not modify the learning situation quickly enough. This might suggest use of Pearlin and Schooler's (1978:9) second category in adopting a response to 'control the meaning of the strainful experience after it occurs but before the emergence of stress'. Bev might have been more successful if she had adopted a more active coping mechanism (Adejumo, & Brysiewicz, 1998) by increasing the effort to achieve her goal, whilst planning would also have enabled her to pause to consider how to deal with her learning.

Kay did, however, adopt an active-cognitive strategy (Holahan and Moos, 1987) involving considering alternative ways of handling the problem. Kay's approach, though, is also typical of the dysfunctional strategy (Adejumo & Brysiewicz, 1998) of disengaging by giving up on activities that would lead to achievement of goals, such as resorting to other less relevant sources of information, rather than persisting with the learning materials. Kay's coping strategies also included emotion-focused coping (Adejumo, & Brysiewicz, 1998) such as seeking moral support, sympathy or understanding and the dysfunctional strategy of venting emotions. The use of these strategies resulted in Kay progressing around Hargreaves' cycle a number of times before she adopted a strategy that enabled her to conclude her studies.

Conclusion

The evidence from both the literature and from this study reveals the importance of students' personal characteristics and social circumstances as influencing factors that determine approaches to study and coping strategies. This is particularly evident in women distance learners, due to the innumerable demands that are placed upon them. Understanding the relationship between approaches to study and the adoption of coping strategies should enable tutors to provide appropriate guidance during the different phases of the coping cycle.

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